

Hamachek retires after 50 years in family business

By Peg Schmeling

Press-Gazette

Frank Hamachek III is settling into retirement after a career of more than 50 years with the family business, the Frank Hamachek Machine Co. of Kewaunee.

He retired at the end of March from the company founded by his grandfather, Frank Hamachek Sr., in 1880.

He was president for 36 years and was the third generation to run the Kewaunee business, which makes food processing machinery.

It was sold to H & K Inc. of Waukesha in 1986. Hamachek stayed on during the transition period after the sale. He was succeeded as president by John M. Wallace, who had been chief engineer for 27 years.

Hamachek, 71, grew up in Kewaunee and spent his entire professional career in the family business.

Profile

He began by working in the plant during summer vacations from high school.

Summer vacations from college were spent servicing pea viners in the Midwest.

After earning his degree in mechanical engineering from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1938, he went into the business full time. At that time, his father, Frank Hamachek Jr., was president. He had taken over after the death of the founder, Frank Sr., in 1935.

Frank III took over as president after the death of his father in 1952. He became sole owner in 1959.

Under his direction, the firm continued to specialize in equipment for harvesting peas and lima beans. He also directed the company's entry into the manufacture of equipment used inside the food processing plant.

A tireless volunteer, Hamachek has been involved with the Boy Scouts for more than 60 years.

"I was a Boy Scout when I was a youngster and I never left it," he said.

He's a member of the Bay Lakes Advisory Council, chairman of the ship committee for Sea Scout Ship Bay Verte 541 of Green Bay, scouting coordinator for Troop 126 of Kewaunee and a member of the nominating committee for the Voyageur District.

He served as a Kewaunee city alderman for six years during the 1940s and was active in the Kewaunee Chamber of Commerce, Rotary Club and Congregational Church. He's also been in organizations in the food processing industry.

Hamachek and his wife, Bette, lived in Kewaunee until about 10½ years ago when they moved to Green Bay. They lived two houses apart on the same street in Kewaunee when growing up.



Press-Gazette photo

50-year career: Frank Hamachek III, the third generation of the family to run the Frank Hamachek Machine Co. of Kewaunee, has retired after working for the company for more than 50 years.

They have four children, Ross, Laurie, John and Holly.

Hamachek docks his 20-foot sailboat at Eagle's Nest during the summer and sails primarily in Green Bay.

If you would like to submit the name of a business person for a profile story, contact Harry Maier, business editor, *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, P.O. Box 19430, Green Bay, Wis. 54307.

Workers reconstruct history at Hamachek reunion

By Jessica La Plante-Wikgren

Regional Editor

Nestled along the tranquil shores of Lake Michigan, the rural community of Kewaunee may not seem like a central node of trendsetting commerce and industry. But Kewaunee enjoys the distinction of being the historic headquarters and birthplace of the world's one-time leading producer of pea harvesting equipment.

Celebrating that historic claim, former employees and engineers of the company that put Kewaunee on the international agricultural manufacturing map gathered Saturday at Heritage Farm in Kewaunee County to take part in a Frank Hamachek Machine Co. reunion.

The reunion's seed was planted in 1997, when Klockner/Hamachek sold its pea and lima bean harvesting operation to a Clear Lake company — emptying its archives of photos and business records by donating a treasure trove of memorabilia to the Kewaunee-based historical foundation, Agricultural Heritage and Resources.

"When the company closed, Klockner Machine Co. offered us just boxes and boxes of memorabilia, photos and information, and that's really how it started," said AHR Secretary Voni Kinjerski.

The reunion commemorated the 10-year anniversary of Hamachek Machine Co.'s closure, an event that marked the end of one of Kewaunee County's longest-running and most widely renowned manufacturing firms.

The idea behind the

reunion was to preserve the legend of Hamachek Machine Co. by giving the company's former employees an "open mic" opportunity to share reminiscences and explain the role workers played in the company's success. Uniting a half-dozen former employees to share stories about the firm's good old days, the videotaped panel was more than just a tribute to a single company. It also served as a testament to the people who laid the county's economic foundation by working in its fields and factories.

Photos of Hamachek's pea viners mounted on the Heritage Farm's walls show very formidable, no-frills machinery. Viewing those same implements through the colorful lens of employees' nostalgia, those inanimate artifacts of yesteryear suddenly take on a whole new character.

Like custom-built automobiles, Hamachek's pea harvesting combines reflected the lively spirits and charismatic attitudes of their creators, the men and women who worked for the company and gave the equipment its originality.

Jim Peot served on the panel of former employees who addressed a barnful of guests Saturday morning, sharing humorous vignettes from the heyday of Hamachek Machine, where he worked as an assemblyman, and later, as a product demonstrator for the company's engineering department.

Mr. Peot recalled his often eventful, cross-country excursions transporting tank-sized pea viner combines on the public highways.

He never will forget driving through Green Bay en route to St. Paul, Minn.,



Photo by Jessica La Plante-Wikgren

Dale Swoboda of Kewaunee's historic preservation group, Agriculture Heritage and Resources Inc., stood near the early handiwork of the world-renowned Frank Hamachek Machine Co., one of Kewaunee's best-known and longest-running manufacturing firms. Founded in 1880 by Frank Hamachek Sr., the company manufactured pea harvesting equipment until 1997.

after dark one summer evening in a Hamachek combine that was lit up as bright as a ballpark. Mr. Peot was stopped by a consternated Green Bay police officer who demanded to know what the heck he was driving and whether he had a license to operate it. Mr. Peot assured the officer that he didn't need a license because it was an agricultural implement.

Representing a technological breakthrough in pea harvesting technology, the self-propelled combines were an uncommon sight at the time.

"This was a self-propelled; this thing is on its own," Mr. Peot said. "That's why nobody knew what it was."

Mr. Peot said the company's employees were responsible for taking the machines on their maiden voyages, making certain they were up to snuff and performing as expected, which often challenged employees to make use of their mental faculties and mechanical skills. Manufacturing and test-driving combines was never boring work and included its share of hazards, such as the danger of flipping over combines during cross-country treks.

Mr. Peot shared his sur-

real experience driving behind a Hamachek combine driven by a company salesman and watching in shock as the combine rolled over when its driver inched too close to a "soft shoulder" on a steep embankment. Though the employee recovered from the incident, the vignette went to show that engineering and manufacturing farming equipment isn't for the faint of heart.

Engineer Les Wilkens joined Hamachek in 1965, the same year the company marketed its first self-propelled, hydrostatic combine. Mr. Wilkens enjoyed belonging to a corps of engineers that were quite literally breaking new ground.

"This was the pea harvesting place," Mr. Wilkens said. "Before the patents ran out, (Hamachek and Co.) were the only ones who were able to manufacture these machines to thresh peas."

He said he enjoyed working for Hamachek because it gave him the opportunity to spend his days at the technological forefront of an industry, engaging his talents and creative instincts to shape the direction of his company's future and agricultural engineering as a whole.

For more information about the Hamachek Machine Co. historical exhibit, visit agriculturalheritage.org or call (920) 388-0604.

"Working for this company, we were able to develop more different machines and they were always looking for something new to put on the machines that would give it sales (appeal)," Mr. Wilkens said.

Between 1935 and 1975, Hamachek manufactured 5,000 stationary pea viners. The company created a full line of self-propelled pea harvesting combines and patented and manufactured corn huskers, vine feeders and a variety of other agricultural implements.

Though much has changed since those early days of fabricating prototype parts and testing top-secret new machines on a nearby farm, much continuity remains in the Kewaunee County landscape. The 19th-century buildings that once housed the machine company always will proudly bear the Hamachek name. Now owned by the Kewaunee Renaissance Company, the buildings recently were renovated into a commune for artists and craftsmen, once again serving as an epicenter of creativity and innovation.

Ending Saturday's Hamachek Reunion on a nostalgic note, former company employees were transported by bus to the newly christened Hamachek Village, where they were treated to a special group tour of their former workplace.

Much like that restored architectural legacy, the oral histories captured on videotape during the Hamachek reunion also will become a permanent community resource. After the exhibit is taken down, the entire collection — including scale models, sales book samples, photo albums, calendars and other bits of miscellany — will be catalogued by the Kewaunee County Historical Society.